In 2010, The California Endowment launched a 10-year, $1 billion plan to improve the health of 14 challenged communities across the state. Over the 10 years, residents, community-based organizations and public institutions will work together to address the socioeconomic and environmental challenges contributing to the poor health of their communities.

Last summer, Sacramento Regional Transit was considering cutting bus routes and raising fares, measures that would have severely impacted residents in South Sacramento’s low-income neighborhoods. “We knew RT was heading down the wrong road, we knew it was in crisis, and we knew that it was going to take a community campaign to turn things at the public transit agency,” said Tamie Dramer, co-founder and chair of Organize Sacramento, an all-volunteer nonprofit that provides training and education to community groups, individuals and organizations on the tactics of community organizing. Training and education for members is supported in part with funding from The California Endowment.

“We realized we needed to form a transit riders union similar to those in Seattle, New York and other cities,” Dramer said.

The result: The Sacramento Transit Riders Union. SacTRU holds its own meetings, on the second and fourth Saturdays of the month at 1 p.m., at Organize Sacramento’s small but tidy 1714 Broadway office. SacTRU’s 100 members spend their meetings reviewing upcoming RT Board agendas for items that impact riders and discussing which items to oppose and support, ongoing RT problems, and the union’s long-term goal strategy. The members take turns attending RT Board meetings and speaking up when necessary.

SacTRU’s long-term mission is to increase access in the Sacramento region to safe, reliable, and fiscally responsible public transit service that links people to resources and opportunities. As SacTRU, the goal is to collectively build power to advocate effectively with the decision-makers at Regional Transit to ensure riders’ and workers’ needs and demands are met.

Too many carless Sacramentans spend hours getting to work daily because they live far from RT’s network or in areas with infrequent service.

From the beginning, public participation at SacTRU’s meetings and events has been exceptional. Even Henry Li, RT’s new general manager, has attended at least two SacTRU meetings, according to Eric Sunderland, another board member of Organize Sacramento. Li’s presence has signaled that he, too, wants improvement. According to an RT spokesperson, RT is “always interested in organizations sharing the same concerns we have: to make transit service ... as excellent as possible.”

Organize Sacramento and its offshoot SacTRU, have for now achieved getting the recommended bus route cuts taken off the table, and riders no longer have to wait in long lines in the blazing summer sun to purchase their monthly passes at the RT Customer Service center on 12th Street, thanks to the shade structures erected by RT after SacTRU advocated that something be done about the situation.

But too many carless Sacramentans still spend hours getting to work daily because they live far from RT’s network or in areas with infrequent service, Dramer said. Those people “desperately need better transit options. So we will continue to grow our riders union, and we will continue to advocate for a better, more user-friendly and affordable system overall.”

Organize Sacramento advocates for good public policies that bring justice and equality to build healthier and stronger communities. Organize Sacramento is the umbrella organization which houses the Sacramento Transit Riders Union (SacTRU). SacTRU is a campaign around restoring rider equity and efficiency to the Sacramento Regional Transit system.

Visit www.SacTRU.org or find them on Facebook.